

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Primer on Prayer”

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Luke 11:1-13

11He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’²He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ *Give us each day our daily bread.*

⁴ *And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.’*

5 And he said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.”⁷And he answers from within, “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.”⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

9 ‘So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’

A minister and a cab driver died at exactly the same time but in two different places. The two happened to appear at the pearly gates of heaven together. It was the minister who first knocked on the door hoping to gain quick entrance. St. Peter greeted him, and immediately told him that it would be a brief wait before the minister could get in to present his case before the Lord. Next, the cab driver pounded on the door of the gates. St. Peter answered, opened the door and immediately let the driver into heaven. When the waiting minister saw what had happened he became furious. He protested to St. Peter, “I should have gotten into heaven right away. I have faithfully preached the gospel for over forty years. What has that cab driver done?” St. Peter answered him

calmly, "I know about your preaching. It has put everyone to sleep for forty years. But everyone who has ever rode in a cab driven by that man has always ended up praying!"

A couple of weeks ago I received a phone call from a man in great distress. He was reaching out for something so I asked him how I might be able to help. His response was immediate, "Could you teach me to pray?" It was a simple request yet such a profound one. How do you teach someone to speak to God? How can you prepare one's ears to listen to the divine? What do we do when we pray? What are we supposed to ask for? What do we say? As I spoke with this man I'm not certain I was a great deal of help. I was being theological. He wanted practical advice. As I tried to answer his questions, I kept thinking of the questions raised by a young boy in a children's book on prayer I once read. The child asked of God, "Dear God, when is the best time I can talk with you? I know that you are always listening, but when will you be listening especially hard in Ann Arbor, Michigan."

In the White House, there is a permanent position for someone in protocol. There is someone on the staff who decides such important things as who sits next to whom during state dinners. This person decides how envelopes to dignitaries in foreign capitals should be addressed. This person decides what kind of requests certain people in certain positions can respond to. It is an important job, because through such proper channels the course of international relations can be changed. I have a sense that we are all looking for that kind of protocol expert when it comes to prayer. We would like to find a way, a style, a manner; just the right words so that we reach the correct source.

Unfortunately, prayer isn't something that seems to come to most of us naturally. We don't think of prayer as an untutored outburst from the heart. We want to be taught how to pray so we may do it right and feel good about doing it.

For some, prayer today has become little more than autosuggestion or self-therapy. In this view, prayer is mainly of value in helping us get our own heads straight about what we ought to want and what we ought to do. Prayer is a time for quiet meditation so that we might enter more deeply into our own egos. Many such prayers are addressed to the self, rather than to God. God really doesn't matter because the one who prays is really talking to him or her self.

For others, prayer is a magic formula through which one hopes to entice an apathetic God to act in a way that pleases us. Someone once said, "what men usually ask of God when they pray is that two and two not make four." There is also an ancient Oriental story of wisdom about a beggar who lay at the gate of a noble's house and received alms from the wealthy family. One day, as the nobleman came out, he realized that he had forgotten something. Calling to the beggar he said, "Beggar, please run me this errand." But the beggar looked up proudly into the nobleman's face and said, "But sir, I ask alms, I do not run errands." In the same manner for some, prayer is asking God for alms without opening ourselves to the possibility of running errands.

For still others; prayer is the request for a quick fix. It is natural, in a world where we get most of what we want with pushbutton speed, that we should assume that prayer is a technique for getting what we want. We know that God is good and generous in many ways. So we assume that God will do all our hearts desire in the time frame in which we are seeking.

I am reminded of Huckleberry Finn's monologue on prayer when he said, "Miss Watson, she took me in the closet and prayed but nothing happened. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get. But it warn't so...I set down one time back in the woods and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuffbox that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, I says to myself, there ain't nothin' in it!"

We might find ourselves agreeing with old Huck when we discover that prayer doesn't change things. It doesn't give us what we want. We can't find God anywhere around when we pray. All of which brings us back to the plea of the disciples in our Scripture lesson, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Jesus taught his disciples to pray by giving them a model prayer, the words we know as the Lord's Prayer. Clearly prayer was a vital part of Jesus' ministry. More than any other gospels, Luke's account of Jesus' life recalls a regular practice of prayer. Here in these brief verses, he teaches his disciples about prayer by his very example.

I don't want to go into detail of each and every part of that prayer this morning. Some preachers have given six or eight sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. But I would like for us to consider the importance of some characteristics of prayer found in the words we repeat every Sunday.

First there is the simple but profound address of "Father." Jesus approaches God directly, simply, confidently, and affectionately. "Hallowed by thy name," is a stirring identification of God in the moment. "May your Kingdom come," is also a cry for God to act in that time. The petition for daily bread is recognition that our lives are sustained by God's everyday provision. The call for forgiveness of our sins is a remembrance of God's ability to forgive human sin. There is also a statement that people who cannot or who will not forgive sin cannot experience God's liberating forgiveness. Finally, the petition concerning temptations recognizes that the present experience of grace is not a guarantee that life will be without difficulties in the future. God alone, not we ourselves, has the power to direct us away from temptation into a life that God intends.

What does this mean for all of us who seek to learn how to pray? I find it enlightening that Jesus did not teach by expounding some complicated series of lessons or outlines. He did not produce a book entitled, "Prayer for Idiots." He did not recommend advanced study or an out-of-town seminar. Rather he taught others to pray by praying himself. He taught by praying like a family conversation, perhaps around a dinner table, praying in a manner where you express yourself with the confidence that you will be heard and understood.

He taught by using prayer as a way to get in touch with God. Prayer is not a way to reach your inner self or a way to get what you want. It is a way of opening up yourself to new possibilities that are provided by your loving Creator. Yes, prayer is voicing your desire, but it is more placing your desires next to God's desires.

He taught by using prayer as an acknowledgement of God's righteousness, as a recognition of God as one who provides for daily needs, as a confession of our wrongs and our failures to live up to our God-given potential, and as a plea for God to bring to us wisdom, courage, and vision in our future challenges. Jesus taught that through prayer, we become closer to the God who is already close to us.

How do we pray? That is an appropriate question. However when we ask it we must also recognize that each of us has this tendency to solidify anything we are taught into rules. So it is with prayer. Jesus' example of the Lord's Prayer was not supposed to teach us practical ways to answer the question of how to pray. Jesus taught that lessons in prayer are not about content, words, technique, time of day, or even disposition. Instead, his example of prayer teaches us an attitude of the heart. Prayer is the confident expression of ourselves to God and the seeking of God's desire for our life and our world.

Thomas Merton wrote that the purpose of a fish trap is to catch fish. When the fish are caught, the trap is forgotten. The purpose of a word is to convey an idea. When the idea is grasped, the words are forgotten. The purpose of a prayer is to enter the presence of God. When one enters God's presence, the words of the prayer are forgotten.

How do we pray? In his book *Simply Sane: The Spirituality of Mental Health*, Gerald May offers some simple advice. He says: "If you pray, pray. Do your best, accept the whole situation, and watch with awe. If you don't pray, do your best, accept the whole situation and watch with awe. If you can't pray, do your best, accept the whole situation, watch with awe, and be still and listen. We will understand, with a little smile, that prayer is happening in spite of us, no matter what."